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# On a Central Psychic Constellation

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IN THIS PAPER, WE SHALL DESCRIBE THE EMERGENCE OF A CENTRAL psychic constellation which is observable during the preoedipal period. Our observations were made in the course of a longitudinal study in which we utilized observational techniques, supplemented by therapeutic material, to investigate the course of development and fate of the conflicts and structures associated with the prelatency period. We shall try to demonstrate that this central constellation emerges by the age of 3 or 4 out of the coordination of certain key variables into a relatively stable, cohesive, psychic organization which persists as an influential factor and which seems to play an important role in codetermining the pattern of further development, including the form and early outcome of the struggles of the oedipal period. The constellation's stability derives from the organization of its constituent elements into a dynamic equilibrium which persists despite changes in the elements themselves as development proceeds.

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Ever since Freud's momentous discovery of the role of the oedipus complex in human mental life, psychoanalysts have centered their attention upon oedipal conflicts and the ego's efforts to resolve them. Advances in ego psychology and research into the events of the preoedipal period have greatly broadened our perspective of development, but the knowledge thus gained has not yet been fully integrated into the mainstream of psychoanalytic theory and practice. There have been many contributions to our understanding of the preoedipal and oedipal periods and of the organization and functioning of the ego. This may be the time for psychoanalytic investigators to pull together the large quantity of information about early development that has been gathered over the years and to make use of it to enhance and refine our understanding of the origins, structure, and fate of the oedipus complex and further development. We hope in this communication to contribute to such an integration by describing what may be a significant aspect of the transition from preoedipal psychic organization to the developmental currents of the oedipal and latency periods.

In 1966, we embarked upon a long-range longitudinal study of eight children who at that time were between 3 and 3½ years of age. We set out to study the patterns of developmental change and evolution which were taking place. We were especially interested in the modifiability of early neurotic patterns and the ultimate fate of early patterns of conflict and conflict resolution.

We drew up a detailed Developmental Profile, derived from the outline devised by Anna Freud (1965), on each child twice yearly for three years and yearly thereafter. Our Profiles were based upon data obtained from multiple sources. In addition to the full clinical records available to us, we observed the children extensively in the classroom, paying attention to their relationships with the teachers and the other children, the fantasies expressed in their play and in their verbal communications, their physical activities and intellectual interests, and their involvement with the various people in their lives (including the investigators). The teachers kept a daily log on each child and met with us regularly to share their observations and impressions. The children and each of their parents were interviewed by one or more of the investigators and

each child underwent a battery of psychological tests prior to each Profile. The study is still in progress.<sup>1</sup>

For the first Profile, a detailed account of each child's personal and family history was compiled. In addition to our own research, we also had access to the data gathered in a lengthy study of each child before his acceptance to the nursery school. The majority of the children had older siblings who also had attended the Center nursery school, which provided an additional rich source of information about the family. Some of the older siblings also had been in treatment at the Center. A staff member regularly saw at least one of each child's parents during the first three years of the study. One of the children had been a subject of a detailed infant study, the raw data of which were made available to us. It is significant that the main patterns of family interaction observed for each child at the beginning of the study seemed to have remained quite stable throughout the course of the investigation.

#### THE CENTRAL CONSTELLATION

Although at the time of the first Profile, the children's development was marked by considerable fluidity and change, certain observations stood out quite clearly. There were plentiful derivatives from prephallic levels of libidinal organization, with wide variation from child to child. All the children showed evidence of having reached the phallic phase of libidinal development, but not all were firmly engaged in it. In most of the children there was little evidence of involvement in oedipal fantasies and conflicts at the time of the first Profile.

As we followed the children through the "oedipal period" and on into latency, we were increasingly impressed that in our initial Profiles we had described a constellation of central characteristics which had become organized in such a way as to have reached relative stability, so that it was bound to exert an important impact upon further development. There were wide individual variations in the relative significance of each of the constituent elements of the

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Bertrand Cramer, who was a member of the research team during the first three years of the study, describes other aspects of our study in this volume.

constellation. In general, however, the components could be grouped into four overall areas, the assessment of which provided a key to each child's readiness at 3 or 3½ to move in certain directions.

The areas which we have come to view as particularly significant are: the pattern of phase progression, drive balance and discharge patterns, the impact of early variations in ego equipment and organization, the self and object representations, and the modes of regulating self-esteem with which the latter are associated. When we watched the children progress into late latency, we were increasingly impressed by the finding that what had been basic in each of these areas at the beginning of the phallic-oedipal period continued to be observable, despite all the changes which took place thereafter.

*By the time the children entered the phallic and oedipal period, the inherent tendency to consolidation and integration underlying the increasing efficiency of operation of the developing psychic apparatus seemed to have coordinated and organized these psychic components into a remarkably stable constellation of forces.* As we followed the children into latency, we found that this central constellation played a highly significant role, in interaction with the effects of ongoing maturational and experiential influences, as a codeterminant of the form and content of the children's oedipal conflicts, the options available for their resolution (or failure thereof), and the personality organization observable in latency.

We do not view the constellation as constituting a binding together either of pathological components exclusively or only of components arising out of normal developmental sequences. We would rather describe the process as a binding together of "core" variables in which conflictual and nonconflictual elements combine to form a characteristic psychic organization.

#### THE COMPONENTS OF THE CENTRAL CONSTELLATION

The variables which we shall describe emerged from the assessment data as significant areas which seemed to be coordinated with one another into a developmentally meaningful, dynamic, interaction system. These variables are an expression of the developmental

forces, drive expressions, ego functions, and patterns of object and self regulation which have crystallized by the fourth year of life.

#### PHASE PROGRESSION

When we correlated current observations with the historical data on each child, it became apparent that each child had his own style of developmental progression. There were individual variations in the pattern of progressive and regressive movements, including variations in intensity of conflict engagement, strength of the progressive pull, ease of regression, range of movement to and fro, degree of fluidity and overlap, and the extent to which various modalities were affected by regressive shifts (Silverman and Neubauer, 1971).

There was evidence of advance to the phallic level, but each child had his own particular combination of prephallic and phallic elements. The impact of conflict at earlier levels upon the course of the phallic phase varied from one child to another. The range included fixations which impeded advance to higher levels, fixations which served as potential attraction points for regression in some areas without greatly interfering with general progression, and contamination of phallic interests and activities by derivatives of earlier conflicts. A few children seemed to shift fluidly back and forth between oral and phallic or anal and phallic interests without dominance at either level of libidinal organization.

It is not possible to speak of drive progression without describing the ego attitudes which are correlated with drive organization. In addition to responding to the specific tasks imposed in each new psychosexual phase, the ego had developed a characteristic attitude toward libidinal or aggressive drive pressure in general, regardless of its phase-specific form. Historical data seemed to point to three sources of this ego attitude: the relative strength of the drives, the child's perception of the reliability of his environmental objects, and his capacity to tolerate drive tension and secure object gratification. In other words, by 3½, the ego of each child had developed a characteristic way of responding to the intensity of the drive demands imposed upon it, of assessing the availability of suitable environmental resources with which they might be satisfied, and of pursuing, capturing, and utilizing those resources.

## DRIVE BALANCE AND DISCHARGE PATTERNS

Our data suggested that by the time they had reached the age of 3½, our children had reached a point of relative stability in the balance between libidinal and aggressive drive expression. The interplay between variations in drive endowment (Alpert et al., 1956) and crucial experiences during the first few years seemed to have determined the way in which libidinal and aggressive drive components had developed, intertwined, and fused with one another during the first three years in each child. The way in which each child's ego had experienced and executed drive demands during the first year or two seemed to have determined the pattern with which the ego sought and experienced pleasure thereafter. The form of aggressive drive expression and ambivalence conflicts seemed to have acquired relative stability as a result of passage through the oral and anal phases. The effect of defense systems, of course, played an important role.

Each child had experienced the onset of the capacity for independent assertion and execution of libidinal and aggressive drive demands differently during the toddler phase. These differences had greatly influenced his view of his ability both to assert himself independently and to move into and enjoy the focused, assertive, independent, competitive explorations and activities of the phallic phase. We saw that the children had come through the prephallic period with various quantities of aggressivity which had to be controlled. The degree to which aggressive drives had been tamed and neutralized (as well as the mechanisms employed for that purpose) also varied from one child to another at the beginning of the phallic phase.

We have seen that inability to mobilize aggressive energies in the pursuit of drive satisfaction in the prephallic period can be the harbinger of a restricted ability to be assertive and competitive during the phallic-oedipal period (an example will be described later on). Another child, Mark, possessed a strong, innate or congenital aggressivity, which enabled him vigorously to pursue libidinal objects during his second and third years despite the repeated loss of important objects. In the phallic phase, however, he

was unable to restrain his aggressivity enough to hold on to his objects (and preserve his object representations against sadistic attack) once he had pursued and captured them. He was so terrified of driving off or destroying his objects, or of incurring terrible, punitive reprisal, that he was forced to abandon oedipal, rivalrous strivings and to turn to previously treasured inanimate objects onto which he could safely divert his aggressive attacks. He could not sufficiently engage himself in oedipal struggles to resolve them and move into latency. He was very intelligent and perceptive, but had little interest in learning for its own sake. He used his skills rather to charm and manipulate people, as well as to defeat and hurt them. In grade school, he used his intellectual abilities in the service of narcissistic withdrawal rather than employing them in the pursuit of knowledge.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL EFFECT OF EARLY VARIATIONS  
IN EGO EQUIPMENT AND ORGANIZATION

In each child we followed, a unique way of perceiving and responding to life situations and adaptational pressures had developed by the time of the first Profile. Although we did not directly study the children's development during the first three years, our data strongly suggested that these individual patterns derived in part from innate dispositions and equipmental variations which had been evident very early in their lives. The historical information we received (one child had also taken part in a thorough infant study, conducted by Annemarie Weil and Anneliese Riess) indicated that from the beginning each child had shown innate preferences for using certain modalities rather than others for relating to and interacting with the outside world. There was evidence of intrinsic variations in tension tolerance and in thresholds of response to external stimulation. The children differed in their perceptual sensitivities as well as in their patterns of assessing and integrating information. Motor activity patterns varied from one child to another and there were significant variations in motor control and in the rudiments of cognitive control apparatuses.

In each case, these variations were observed in early infancy and their impact upon behavior and personality characteristics was



readily apparent during the first three years. However vague or unclear they may have been about other matters, nearly all the parents were unequivocally certain about these particular early observations. As we followed the children during the course of the study we were impressed with the ongoing consistency with which these individual characteristics remained observable and with the significant impact which they seemed to exert upon the developmental process.

The observation that variations in endowment, in interplay with environmental experience, contribute significantly to ongoing development is not a new one (Escalona, 1963, 1968; Korner, 1964; Thomas et al., 1963; Weil, 1956, 1970). It is difficult to predict from infant studies alone what will be the eventual developmental impact of early variations (Escalona and Heider, 1959). Longitudinal study beyond the period of infancy is necessary before the meaning of congenital traits and characteristics can be appreciated (Ritvo et al., 1963). By the fourth year, enough structuralization and organization seem to have taken place to indicate which factors have been developmentally significant and to permit reasonable predictions about the fate of the structural and organizational elements to whose evolution they have contributed. Our own findings indicate that by the age of 3½, they have become organized into a relatively stable, central constellation which exerts an important influence upon psychic development thereafter. We do not mean to imply that no change occurs in the individual elements with further development. *The stability to which we refer is that of a dynamic interaction of interrelated factors within an organized, integrated, dynamic grouping or constellation which remains relatively stable despite changes in the constituent elements.*

An example may help to clarify this point. One child as an infant had been relatively inactive motorically but very alert and active perceptually, with precocious discriminative powers. Possessing a high degree of visual and tactile sensitivity, Karen had related to people largely through those modalities, quietly savoring contact in favorable circumstances, but closing her eyes and withdrawing into sleep when conditions were unsatisfactory. By the age of 3, she had developed a pattern of motor restriction, underaggressivity, vigilant avoidance of excessive stimulation, and defensive scotomization,

coupled with exquisite perceptual sensitivity and a rich and active fantasy life. As we followed her development further, we were impressed both with the stability of this pattern and with the important role it played in her overall development.

In another of our children, Jack, we saw how from infancy, an unusual capacity to tolerate tension was combined with a particular perceptual style of slow, thorough observation and assessment of his objects and environment. Such attributes significantly influenced his ongoing development and contributed to the evolution of a psychic constellation which included low-keyed, measured interaction with objects, steady drive progression and integration, much problem-solving activity in the realm of fantasy, and a highly developed use of his intellect for careful observation, empathic understanding, the working over of drive demands, and scientific explorations. These individual variations in ego function became an important factor in his ongoing development.

#### SELF AND OBJECT REPRESENTATIONS AND THE REGULATION OF SELF-ESTEEM

In the process of passage through the normal autistic, symbiotic, and separation-individuation phases (Mahler, 1968), each child in the study appeared to have developed a unique set of self and object representations and a related group of mechanisms for preserving self-esteem and narcissistic well-being that greatly influenced his current and ongoing perception of himself and of the object world in general.

One aspect of this involved self-object differentiation (Jacobson, 1964). Disturbances in this area could be traced to regressions, the impact of endowment, the effect of certain conflicts, or environmental interferences. A second facet involved the nature of the self and object representations. We saw that the way in which the children viewed themselves and their main objects, consciously and unconsciously, affected the way they approached the tasks of the phallic-oedipal period in important ways.

A third aspect was the economic one. By the time a child had reached the age of 3 there might already have been a significant depletion in the narcissistic cathexis of the self representation, an

overidealization of his objects, or a pattern of narcissistic grandiosity, excessive self-preoccupation and withdrawal from objects. In such instances, the disturbances were carried over into the phallic and oedipal struggles, coloring their form and contents and imposing limitations upon their outcome. At the time of the first Profile, we already could see which aspects of the self representation received special narcissistic cathexis and we could discern certain aspects of the evolving ego ideals, including whether they contained demands which were excessively high or low.

Another item of importance involved the maintenance of self-esteem. It was significant whether or not self-esteem regulation was based upon realistic self and object representations and actual achievements. In some instances the ego had acquired confidence in its ability to maintain control over tension states, achieve independent mastery, and secure affection and approval from its objects. In others, for various reasons, self-esteem was dependent to a significant extent upon the provision of certain external supplies.

We could offer many examples of the significance of this developmental dimension. Mark, for example, who had difficulty regulating the expression of his aggressivity, had suffered a number of object losses (including that of his father) early in his life. His image of himself as dangerously destructive to his objects and of men as weak, disappointing, and helplessly vulnerable to illness and death contributed in an important way to his need hastily to give up his rivalrous oedipal ambitions and to the weakness of his striving toward a masculine identity.

Jeanette's alertness, superior intellectual endowment, high tension tolerance, adaptability, and unusual capacity for self-control and delay were quickly recognized by her dependent and ambitious but unsuccessful parents. In their eagerness to realize their ambitions vicariously through her, they actively reinforced her high self-expectations and fostered the development of a lofty ideal self to which she aspired. The central constellation observable in her fourth year was organized about the need to maintain this idealized self representation. She easily advanced into a phallic libidinal organization, in which her fantasies included an all-powerful, illusory phallus. Yet, the need to be in continual command of an adulatory environment and her inability to risk defeat severely

compromised Jeanette's ability to engage herself in oedipal, rivalrous struggles, and she entered latency as a haughty, lonely girl who was incapable of intense social relationships and hampered by the burden of unresolved oedipal and preoedipal conflicts.

A CLINICAL ILLUSTRATION OF  
THE CENTRAL CONSTELLATION

We have chosen a child in whom all four component areas of the central constellation are well defined and in whom the contribution of the constellation to oedipal and early latency development is particularly clear. The psychological makeup of this child also afforded us an unusually good view of her fantasy life and intellectual processes; she has received no psychological treatment to complicate the developmental process.

KAREN AT THE BEGINNING OF NURSERY SCHOOL

Karen was just 3 years old when she started in our nursery school. She stood out not only for her delicate prettiness, but even more for her sober demeanor and quiet aloofness. She keenly observed all the activities, but held back for a long time from direct participation. Although she obviously yearned for attention from the teachers, her overtures were so meek and tentative that they often went unanswered. She was happy when they responded in a friendly but low-keyed manner, but had to pull away when they were effusive with her. When her overtures were ignored, she was dejected and withdrew temporarily into a solitary reverie, accompanied at times by autoerotic activity.

Karen could more easily accept the friendly approaches of the other children, and gradually reached out for friendship with them, but she tended to withdraw whenever there was more than one other child in the play. She occupied herself mainly with simple, solitary activities that afforded her a good vantage point for observing the others. She alternated in her play between competitively making the tallest towers and constructing carefully tended buildings and enclosures, which she populated with people and animals.

In her individual interview with a male observer, Karen appeared to be very interested in him, but froze after she had taken two steps into the room. She stood there during the interview and poured out a stream of anxious, loosely organized chatter, the content of which concerned feelings of helplessness, conflicts over eating and biting, yearning for her father, who had just gone on a plane trip, fear of being overexcited sexually the way she had been at times with her father and brother, and guilt over masturbation and sex play with her brother. At home, Karen continued to compete actively with her brother for her mother's attention. She indicated repeatedly that she felt cheated (of attention, oral supplies, her father, and a phallus), but was unable to maintain an angry attack upon her mother without soon making up to her.

#### EARLY HISTORY

Karen had been conceived in the hope of saving a crumbling marriage. Her mother characteristically staved off anxiety and depression via flamboyant bravado, seductiveness, a stream of chatter, and immersion in a kaleidoscopic sea of sensation. Her father was charismatic, creative, and unpredictable. During Karen's infancy, her mother became increasingly anxious and depressed as the inevitability of a divorce became obvious. The father left the home when Karen was 8 months old, but he continued seeing the children three times a week until the divorce, when Karen was 2½, after which he temporarily left the state. Although his contact with the children was irregular thereafter, with absences of many months at a time, Karen remained loyally attached to him.

Karen was so motorically inactive during the first few days after her birth that her mother worried about her. She developed colic, which lasted for four months. She was noted from the very beginning to be unusually alert, perceptive, and visually observant. Like her older brother, Karen very early discriminated between men and women. She showed a clear preference for men, and made an early attachment to her father.

Blocked tear ducts had to be pressed out each day by her mother during her first year. They were finally probed free by the doctor when Karen was 12 months old. Teething, which took place quickly, was associated with a moderate amount of discomfort.

Karen's mother tended to offer the breast to her frequently as a universal panacea. When weaning was attempted at 6 months, Karen resolutely refused to accept a cup, and continued at the breast until it was abruptly removed at 10 months. She refused milk in any form for the next year and a half. Mrs. K. was intermittently depressed and anxious during Karen's first year. Most of the time, she responded appropriately to Karen's needs, but there were times when she was less available. At other times, apparently in response to her own needs, Mrs. K. picked Karen up to cuddle and feed her when she actually had been quietly asleep. Rather than protesting these ill-timed, intrusive stimulations, Karen responded by closing her eyes and "falling asleep."

Toilet training was begun at 2 years of age and took about a year to complete. On the toilet Karen showed anxiety that began with fear of falling in; the flushing also disturbed her. She made no protest against the toilet-training demands and did well for a while, but when her parents were divorced and her father moved away, a general ego regression took place, during which she wet herself intermittently day and night, and she tended periodically to retain her stool. Her father returned when she was 3 years old; she responded by recovering from her regressive episode and attaining complete control of toilet functions.

When she was about 2½ years old, she began to masturbate and was seduced by her 4½-year-old brother into mutual genital explorations, which continued intermittently thereafter with the mother's tacit approval. Karen's brother, the only sibling, was good looking, aggressive, and talented, and Mrs. K. scarcely concealed her preference for him.

#### DEVELOPMENTAL ASSESSMENT AT 3 YEARS

##### *Phase Progression*

At 3 years, Karen showed intense libidinal wishes and longings, with an adherent attachment to her aims and objects and intense fear both of overstimulation and of loss. Despite intermittent temporary flight and emotional withdrawal, she maintained cathexis of her objects via vivid fantasy relationships to them even

when they actually were absent or unavailable. Her persistent longings and her efforts to seek out new possibilities of finding the gratifying relationships for which she yearned encouraged continual psychosexual progression.

A fluid libidinal organization seemed to have emerged, in which persistent oral yearnings had become interwoven with powerful longings to receive a penis. These unified longings contributed to the yearning for a man as a rescuer and provider, although inability to risk the loss of her mother prevented Karen from pushing away from her. There was a capacity for fluid, progressive-regressive shifts within her drive organization, without firm closure and with only relative phallic primacy. There had been a weakness in her anal level engagement and in her ability to control and dominate her objects. The early sexual play with her brother seemed nevertheless to have promoted early vaginal awareness and fantasies (e.g., a lollypop was found in her vagina when she was 2½ years old) which, combined with her observations of her mother's coquettish interest in men and her early attachment to her father, had stimulated movement into phallic and oedipal interests.

#### *Drive Balance and Discharge Patterns*

Karen showed intense libidinal cathexis of object representations, accompanied by a relative inability to mobilize aggressive energies either to assert and secure possession of her objects or to do battle with them. The genetic roots seemed to include both innate and experiential factors.

Karen had been relatively inactive motorically as an infant, relating to the world largely via perceptual (especially visual and tactile) channels. She had possessed a considerable need for sensual contact from infancy on, enjoying the contact when it was presented in a comfortable fashion and withdrawing from it by tuning out and turning off contact when it was intensive or hyperstimulating. From the combination of innate inclinations and the effect of repeated experiences with objects who were inconsistent, often overstimulating, and difficult to control or influence, she had developed a pattern of pursuing objects by studying them, learning to anticipate their behavior, and adapting her own behavior to make herself

pleasing to them, rather than aggressively demanding from them what she needed or complaining when they failed her.

*The Developmental Effect of Early Variations in Ego Equipment and Organization*

From earliest infancy, Karen had presented a striking combination of relative motor inactivity and a high degree of visual alertness and perceptual activity. She had tended to use tactile sensitivity and visual pursuit as her favored modalities for relating to the world around her. She also had tended from very early on to withdraw from ill-timed intrusions and experiences of overstimulation by closing her eyes and retreating into a sleeplike state. These early characteristics seemed to have developed from her particular endowment, reinforced by ongoing experiences (the pattern of feeding and maternal handling, the lacrymal duct probing, uncomfortable teething, maternal depression and anxiety, and her father's departures), especially during the first year.

An early tendency to employ a defensive style centering about flight, avoidance, and withdrawal, rather than mobilizing aggressive energies to demand gratification and fight off unwelcome intrusions, had persisted as a basic, ongoing characteristic. Karen had become particularly sensitive, empathic, and observant, but was continually on guard against the possibility of being overwhelmed by excessive stimulation. Associated with this was an ego attitude toward her own aggressive and libidinal impulses in which vivid, relatively undisguised fantasies could be tolerated, but their direct motor expression was prohibited. The ego avoided the possibility of their enactment, at the expense at times of an extensive restriction of ego activity in general.

Karen's learning capacity was enhanced by acute powers of observation, a ready capacity to absorb rote information, a vivid memory, and a fine sense of color and form. It was hindered, on the other hand, by her tendency to turn away from painful or disturbing stimuli, avoid the new and unknown, and reduce impinging stimuli by scotomizing the field of attention. Avoidance of competition and an inclination to hold on to what was already possessed, but not seek after more, completed the picture observable at 3 years.



*Self and Object Representations and the Regulation of Self-Esteem*

Karen's self and object representations centered about vivid images of idealized, loving, and protective objects whom she yearned to possess in reality, although she had little confidence that she might actually succeed in doing so. Although her past experiences had led her to view her objects as potential sources of pleasurable gratification, they also had led her to perceive them as unreliable, frequently elusive or unavailable, and often painfully overstimulating. Correspondingly, she viewed herself as being not quite desirable enough to attract her objects or as strong enough to catch, hold onto, and control them.

Karen's self representation had received insufficient narcissistic investment and she lacked the capacity to mobilize enough aggression to achieve full individuation from her objects. Since her self-esteem was still largely dependent upon the objects' response to her, she was cautious lest she alienate them. She suppressed angry, complaining feelings and made an effort to be good and pleasing to win their favor. Since her defensive style was organized about flight, avoidance, and restriction of activity, she was hindered in her ability to utilize reality experiences to modify either her fears or the contents of her self and object representations. This served to reinforce the tendency to withdraw from interaction with actual, new objects and to turn to her highly cathected, idealized, fantasy objects. She always returned, however, to an interest in the outside world, where she sought objects who might approximate the idealized object representations which she held so dear. This indicated to us that she did not give up hope, but maintained her object cathexis at times of disappointment and injury. It was possible, therefore, that if she were fortunate enough to find the right people, she would be capable of achieving meaningful change as a result of her interaction with these new objects.

## THE CENTRAL CONSTELLATION AT 3 YEARS

The initial Profile contained evidence of the coordination of the key developmental factors we have described above into an internally coordinated constellation possessing a high degree of stability. As

we have followed Karen's development, we have become increasingly convinced that this constellation has been an influence upon her ongoing development. A strong innate progressive push, reinforced by the forward pull exerted by a sexually stimulating environment, more than counteracted the retarding effects of oral fixations. Since her ego organization permitted wide progressive-regressive fluctuation and an unusual degree of fluidity and overlap, early fixations did not prevent developmental advance, but were carried along and woven into the higher levels of organization which progressively evolved.

Karen's relative inability to mobilize aggression interfered with her ability to take control of and possess her objects and interfered with certain aspects of individuation, but it also contributed to the preservation of her object cathexes at times of disappointment and narcissistic injury. This very sensual little girl's tendency to establish intense, discriminative cathexes and her ability to maintain her object cathexes in fantasy, even in the prolonged absence of her cathected object, helped preserve the availability of constant, positive object representations. Although her self-esteem remained dependent upon positive responses from her more or less idealized objects, she was able to seek out such responses and to use them in the service of developmental progression.

The ability to make restitutive use of fantasy at times of actual frustration and failure enabled her to retreat temporarily when confronted by overwhelming stress. Stemming partly from intrinsic variations in ego endowment and partly from the impact of early experiences of overstimulation and ego inadequacy, she seemed to have developed a well-organized defense system built around avoidance, temporary introversion and withdrawal, flight, and ego restriction. It served to control anxiety, although at the price of reduced ego flexibility and freedom of action, so that developmental progression could proceed. An important aspect of Karen's central constellation was the ability to make good use of environmental resources to facilitate developmental progression.

#### THE PHALLIC-OEDIPAL PHASE

There was steady movement forward between 3 and 6 years into

increasing phallic and oedipal interests. Although phallic organization was attained, her libidinal organization remained fluid, with a plentiful admixture of oral fantasy and conflict and an ease of progressive-regressive alternation. Karen persistently wooed her father, who had returned to the city with his new wife, and there was evidence of intense genital excitement in his presence, associated with wishes to abandon herself to him. She was frightened by her excitement, however, particularly at times of natural regression, and was unable to spend the night at her father's apartment. She maintained an intense, visual, idealizing interest in him as well as vivid fantasies about him when she was not with him, but her activity was restricted in his presence and she had difficulty expressing appropriate anger at him.

There was evidence of intense anger at her mother and of attempts to push away from her, but Karen was inhibited in her expressions of resentment and hostility, which she was unable to sustain for long. There were indications of intermittent longing for closeness with her mother (which at times had to be warded off anxiously) and of inability to give her up as a source of narcissistic reinforcement and libidinal satisfaction. Karen was a fussy eater at school as well as at home and developed a number of transient food intolerances.

At school, Karen was increasingly assertive and capable of a certain amount of verbal aggression and sarcasm, but she continued to be relatively restricted, inhibited, and somewhat phobic. She became increasingly able to woo the attention of her favorite teachers, but remained quite cautious and overly sensitive to rebuff. Her learning and her peer relations progressed, but she was limited to a significant extent by her cautiousness, reluctance to explore the unknown, tendency to scotomize, and relative inability to be competitive. She grew increasingly interested in the male investigator who was following her progress, and gradually acquired the courage to approach him in the classroom and woo his attentions in competition with the other girls. When she finally dared to make physical contact with him, she reacted with excitement that necessitated prompt removal of herself from his presence. In her semiannual interviews with him, she initially showed a wistful yearning for him to be a prince charming who would like her, care

for her, and provide her with the feeding breast she had lost and the phallus of which she had been cheated. This fantasy gradually faded and was replaced by increasingly exciting images of being taken for wild roller-coaster rides, being thrown down and run over, and being attacked and torn apart. Castration themes alternated with restitution themes in these fantasies. Retreat to peaceful scenes of mutual feeding became less and less prominent with each set of interviews until it finally disappeared.

#### THE LATENCY PERIOD

Karen moved into latency via resigned acceptance that she could not obtain from her parents all that she wanted from them. Her mother was absorbed increasingly in pursuing a career and social activities, with less and less time and energy available for the children. Her father remarried when Karen was 5½, and a year later had a son. This half brother aroused in Karen wistful envy of the lovingly fed baby and the fantasy of herself becoming father's bride.

Karen gradually shifted from her parents to her teachers as objects to be wooed and won. She was fortunate in that each year from 5 to 9 her teacher was a perceptive young woman who liked and appreciated Karen and was alert to her need for low-keyed interest, warmth, and approval. Their descriptions of Karen bore a striking resemblance to our original observation of her. They depicted her as a perceptive observer, sensitive to the responses of others, averse to exploring the unfamiliar, and reluctant to take the initiative, although she responded well to gentle encouragement.

Karen became excited but anxious in the presence of men. With familiar men, including her father, she was provocative and seductive, but she shunned direct physical contact (even at 9, she did not like to be kissed by her father). Her reaction to new men in her life was largely one of avoidance. The wildness of the boys and the excitement they aroused in her discomfited her. Her intense wish to be liked, her efforts to please, and her empathetic response to their needs made her very popular with her peers. Although her academic achievements and popularity did much to raise her self-esteem, she continued to feel uncertain of her successes and to

worry about losing her place in her friends' affections, even when she was past the age of 9 years. She gradually became able to express anger and to register complaints against her mother (and brother), but she could do so only timidly. She developed a rather typical feminine superego organization, although with more dependence upon external approbation and fear of loss of approval and admiration than the average.

#### THE THEORETICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CENTRAL CONSTELLATION

We have described the emergence by the age of 3 or 4 years of a relatively stable, organized, central psychic constellation which persists thereafter as an influential factor. Our conclusions are related to two fundamental propositions regarding human development. One is the notion that development proceeds via a process of sequential organization and reorganization in which new systems of psychic functioning periodically evolve to supersede previously existing systems as dominant, organizational configurations. The other is the proposal that increasing differentiation and hierarchy formation are accompanied in the developmental process by a tendency to internal coordination and cohesion which leads to stability and systemic integrity. To state the latter proposition another way, there is an intrinsic tendency toward synthesis and self-regulation which leads to a "bonding between the interacting components" (Sander, 1973).

The work of a number of investigators suggests that in the course of development there are certain nodal points at which critical reorganizations can be identified. Freud (1905), for example, reconstructed the existence of successive waves of libidinal reorganization in childhood, each of which centers about a particular erotogenic zone. Abraham (1925) defined the epigenetic nature of this sequence of libidinal reorganization. Erikson (1950) later expanded this point of view to include the psychosocial aspects of development and extended its application to the entire life cycle from birth to death.

Spitz (1959, 1965), Ritvo et al. (1963), and others have demonstrated that a sequence of progressive reorganizations can be

observed in the first two years in which psychic elements periodically regroup themselves into a new, relatively stable, superordinate organization which supplants the previous one as the current *modus operandi* of adaptation. Each new organizational system has its own way of perceiving, processing, and responding to environmental stimuli and drive demands. The periodic regroupings, leading to new levels of psychic equilibrium, derive only partly from the appearance of new ego structures. In part, they derive from shifts in the coordination or patterning of already existing structures.

Piaget has shown that cognitive development proceeds by means of a complex, epigenetic sequence in which each developmental stage is derived from and represents the outer limit of equilibrium of the previous stage (Silverman, 1971). He has demonstrated that the process of reorganization in each stage leads to the crystallization of an end point of organizational patterning in which firm internal bonding provides relative stability. Cognitive development may be particularly well suited, in fact, to demonstrate the interplay of epigenetic reorganization and synthesis or interaction of constituent elements into stable, dynamic systems within the developmental process. George Klein, for example, has described the evolution during early childhood of an organized system of multiple, cognitive controls which together constitute a lifelong, cognitive style that is unique in each individual. He concluded that in the course of progressive restructuring of psychic mechanisms there evolves a stable, regulating organization which represents an equilibrial balance among individual variations in intrinsic ego equipment, response to the pressure of drive demands, and the necessity of accommodating to environmental restrictions (Klein, 1954, 1958; Santostefano, 1969).

It is our impression that the age of 3 years may be a nodal point at which a crucial, developmental reorganization reaches stability. The child's style of progressive-regressive movement usually cannot be adequately appreciated until he has gone through enough of the total range of his libidinal development at least to have entered the phallic phase. Except in extreme instances, it is also not until then that the developmental impact of prephallic fixations can be gauged. Often enough, the relative balance between libidinal and aggressive drive pressures does not reach a stable enough form for it

to be identified accurately before the move forward from anal ambivalence conflicts to phallic phase interests. By the age of 3, the child's ego capacities have had time to unfold and develop, and the impact of his innate endowment has had a chance to demonstrate itself. By then, there has been enough time for him to utilize his resources in interaction with an expanding object world, with its various adaptational demands and its provision of a range of stimuli and opportunities for exercise of the child's mental and emotional machinery. Three years is also the age cited by Mahler (1968) as the time when the separation-individuation process has proceeded sufficiently for relative object constancy and relatively stable self and object representations to have been attained. These various dimensions seem gradually to become organized with one another, under the direction of the integrative function (Hartmann, 1939).

The observation that certain developmental characteristics coalesce early in life into stable, dynamic groupings exerting influence upon further development is not a new one. In addition to Spitz (1959, 1965), Sander (1962, 1970), Escalona (1963), and others have made extensive investigations into the evolution of patterned modes of functioning out of the coordination of the innate rhythms and executive tendencies of the infant with the modifying influence of the mother's responses to him.

Anna Freud (1971) has described an early "psychosomatic matrix," deriving from this interaction, which sets the scene for the development of certain aspects of the pleasure-unpleasure balance, the form and strength of object attachment, certain ego strengths and weaknesses, and the pathway to somatic compliance. These form a matrix, according to Anna Freud, out of which later id and ego structures, conflicts involving the emerging component drives, and the infantile neurosis ultimately develop.

Annemarie Weil (1970) has formulated in rich detail how the interaction between the infant's equipment and early experiences leads to the emergence of a "basic core" of fundamental trends which accompanies the infant as he enters the symbiotic phase. Since the basic core influences and intertwines with later psychological developments, it continues to be evident, according to Weil, as a more or less discrete, psychic organization within the personality as it develops further.

Our own observation of a developmentally influential central constellation in the fourth year dovetails closely with the concepts of the "psychosomatic matrix" and the "basic core." What we have described in this paper appears to be a manifestation of the tendency within the developing psychic apparatus toward periodic regrouping of central tendencies and characteristics into a new, central organization which incorporates the previous one into it as it supersedes it as a central, guiding, developmental constellation. Anna Freud's concept of multiple, converging and diverging, developmental lines (1965) is pertinent in this regard. Periodically, certain key lines of development intersect in such a way that they become mutually coordinated and organized into a relatively stable constellation of forces, which then plays a central role in the developmental process. The central constellation observable in the fourth year would seem to grow out of earlier organizational constellations as they interact with new structures and with the deformations imposed upon the psychic apparatus by new developmental requirements.

We have been tracing the fate of the central constellation itself in the course of further development. What we have seen so far has indicated that it persists with sufficient stability to stamp itself upon the organization of the personality during the oedipal and latency periods. Besides affecting the form and content of oedipal conflicts and the options available for their resolution, it influences character structure, intellectual and cognitive styles, and sublimative potential, at least during the period in which we have followed the children. To understand the degree to which the constellation itself changes in the course of development through childhood and into adulthood will require further longitudinal study, correlated with study and review of the analyses of children and adults. We are not yet in a position to assess this adequately, but we hope to continue our study until the children have reached early adulthood. We are especially interested in seeing what will be the effect of the major shifts and reorganizations that can be expected to take place during adolescence.

It is our impression that our observations fit in with a current tendency in child psychoanalysis to evolve a theoretical formulation which fits the oedipus complex into the mainstream of development



at the same time that it recognizes its central role in the organization of the neuroses. We are referring to a shift in emphasis from a formulation which depicts the oedipus complex as *the cause of the neurosis* to one which would consider the oedipus complex as a *dynamically central feature* of a developmental process which may or may not predispose to neurotic solutions of developmental tasks. In this formulation, unresolved oedipal conflicts would appear as a central part of the neurotic process rather than as its source. Anna Freud (1971) stated:

There is a world of difference between . . . the past and the present scene. What we are pursuing at present are not evaluations undertaken from the viewpoint of any later mental disorder but an elaborate map of infantile mental difficulties as such, or, to express it more succinctly, an enumeration, description, and explanation of any interference with optimal mental growth and development. On the basis of our knowledge of developmental phases, as established by reconstruction from adult analysis, by child analysis, by direct observation of infants and young children, we attempt to do this from birth onward, with the phallic-oedipal phase placed not at the lower but at the upper end of our investigation. . . . It appears almost as a by-product that, while doing so, we also assemble those developmental aspects which, in due course, will lend themselves to the production of conflicts and may even determine beforehand which among the available defense mechanisms the individual's ego will choose to employ and, accordingly, which forms of compromise and symptom formation will be open to him [p. 82].

This is not to say that all neurotic manifestations arise out of processes that begin in the earliest years. A developmental process that is proceeding adequately can be altered at any point, particularly by events occurring in such critical periods as the oedipal stage. An initially adequate developmental process can be transformed in this manner into a deviant one. But even in such a case, it would seem to us that organizational predispositions must also play an important role, along with and in interaction with traumatic experiences, in determining the final outcome.

Psychoanalysis has demonstrated that neurotic disorders consist of unsuccessful attempts to obtain relief from insoluble, unconscious conflict. It has been recognized that the main conflicts underlying

the infantile neurosis crystallize during the oedipal period. Advances in ego psychology, investigations into the psychoses and narcissistic disorders, and the opportunity to carry out longitudinal observations of infants and young children, however, have called our attention to the enormous importance of preoedipal development in neurogenesis. It has even led some investigators to question whether the principal determinant of emotional health or neurosis is the oedipal conflict and its resolution or whether matters are already decided in the period before the emergence of the oedipal conflict. Our study suggests to us that the issue may not be whether the earlier period or the oedipal conflicts are more significant, but how the earlier developments contribute to the content and form of the oedipal conflicts and the means employed to resolve them.

The psychoanalytic view of the developmental process emphasizes the significance of fixation points which impede developmental progression and predispose the individual to regressive flight to escape from the tensions and anxieties created by insoluble conflict at higher levels. The regression, of course, only leads to new conflicts and anxieties at earlier levels of psychic organization. We believe the understanding of neurotic functioning would be broadened by supplementing this genetic point of view, with its emphasis upon fixation and regression, with one which looks upon the developmental process prospectively as a steadily evolving and reorganizing dynamic interplay of psychic forces.

This might help clarify the individual differences among children as they progress through the various developmental phases. Employing the concept of the early crystallization of a central constellation has provided us with an extra vantage point from which to consider a number of questions. One of these concerns the ability of some children to relinquish or modify their maternal attachments relatively easily during the course of their oedipal struggles, while others cling tenaciously to them at all costs. A second involves the factors determining the choice of fantasy or action as the preferred channel of discharge and the impact of this choice upon the oedipal outcome. Other questions which seem to be elucidated concern the choice by different children of different sets of defense mechanisms with which they struggle with their oedipal

conflicts, the degree to which oedipal conflicts are object-oriented or narcissistic in orientation, the tendency to employ predominantly positive or negative oedipal solutions, and certain aspects of the structure of the ego ideal and the superego's methods of enforcing its prohibitions.

The value of coordinating the genetic point of view with a developmental one emphasizes the importance of the principles of epigenesis, synthesis, progressive organization and reorganization, and change of function. When the early stages of development are reconstructed in the course of a therapeutic analysis, they may appear to be relatively discrete, well-demarcated, and discontinuous in nature. When one follows children prospectively, however, one sees a great deal of overlap, fluctuation to and fro, and a gradual, shifting metamorphosis in which old mechanisms acquire new functions and old patterns are rearranged and more or less modified in the interest of adaptation to new tasks and new requirements.

Nunberg's emphasis upon the importance of the synthetic function has been very helpful to us. He pointed out that underlying the increasing efficiency of the evolving psychic apparatus is an inherent tendency to integration and consolidation: "The tendency to simplify and generalize, to integrate and the like, reveals that the synthetic function of the ego is subject to an economic principle, which induces the ego to economize expenditure of effort. . . . Synthesis thus brings about not only unity of the whole personality but also simplification and economy in the ego's mode of operation" (1932, p. 153). The concept of a synthetic (Nunberg, 1930) or integrative (Hartmann, 1939) function operative within the developmental process has enabled us to study the ways in which developing structures and functions are fitted together and coordinated into operational systems and subsystems in the course of development.

#### THE CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CENTRAL CONSTELLATION

The data emerging from our studies are clinically relevant. The diagnostic evaluation of children is complex and arduous. Symp-

toms and developmental disturbances, as Anna Freud (1965, 1974) repeatedly has stressed, are significant only insofar as they reflect the existence of meaningful disturbances of overall developmental progression or of key elements within it. Assessment of the pattern of developmental progression is particularly difficult with the prelatency child, for whom the diagnostic task is largely predictive in nature.

In a previous paper (Silverman and Neubauer, 1971), we stated our opinion that with prelatency children a series of cross-sectional Profiles was required to obtain the longitudinal dimension that would permit an assessment of *the developmental significance* of temporary disturbances, symptoms, or imbalances. It is our impression at this point, however, that delineation of the central constellation identifiable by 3½ years can be an alternative means of determining the directions in which overall development is proceeding. It describes the paths being taken by important developmental lines and the ways in which they are knitting together and becoming mutually organized. It has helped us to see the degree to which various patterns and structures are open to change and the directions in which they can be expected to steer developmental responses to the phase-specific experiences and conflicts of the oedipal and latency periods. Since the constellation contains important indications of the basic fabric of the personality organization, it is a key to understanding the way in which the child will deal with the issues which have to be resolved in the years ahead.

If it turns out that treatment is indicated, the central constellation can help the clinician decide which forms of intervention are most likely to be effective. The choice is especially wide with preschoolers, since important areas of the personality are still plastic and are highly vulnerable to outside influence. Mapping out the central constellation can help the clinician to pinpoint the precise target areas toward which therapy should be directed. It may be possible, for example, by strengthening a specific ego function to alter a child's self representation in important ways and to bring about necessary changes in his or her defensive system. Recourse to the central constellation also can help distinguish between those areas which are rigidly locked into a pattern of maldevelopment

and those in which longitudinal, developmental pressures are likely to bring about sufficient, fortuitous growth and reorganization that the decision whether or not to intervene in the developmental process can be postponed to a later time. The grasp of the basic personality fabric which the central constellation provides can help the clinician to achieve precision in his choice among the various therapeutic procedures available by pinpointing the impact of each at any point in time. It can help him to decide whether the best therapeutic approach will be a specific educational program, efforts to effect changes in parental handling, the provision of new object relationships, one or another psychotherapeutic approach, or a carefully planned sequence of more than one of these modalities.

We believe that our observations are of significance to the psychoanalyst whether he is working with children or with adults. The psychoanalytic task consists in undoing fixations and facilitating the resolution of repressed conflicts. The method we have been employing for this has been principally genetic and dynamic in its approach, but these points of view have been coordinated more and more over the years with structural and developmental viewpoints. The psychoanalytic method concentrated at first upon reconstructing the emergence of insoluble unconscious conflicts between drive pressures, ego and superego attitudes, and environmental demands. This has been supplemented increasingly by an interest in studying the structural organization within which the conflicts emerge and are perpetuated and in exploring the shifts and changes which take place at successive developmental levels.

It is here that our observations become relevant. We have seen that by the age of  $3\frac{1}{2}$ , a number of influential developmental factors have coalesced into a relatively stable balance of forces within the personality organization and that this constellation helps to regulate the way in which experiences are perceived and dealt with from that point on. It would seem to us that reconstruction of the emergence of this central psychic constellation out of its constituent components and of its developmental impact (as well as of the internal changes forced upon it by developmental progression) at each level thereafter would enhance the psychoanalyst's understanding of his analysands, whatever their age. It would add to our grasp of the interplay of forces operating within them and,

therefore, to the origins of their characterological and neurotic structural formations. It would place us in a better position to define the limits within which we might expect change to take place in our patients and to map out the specific strategy by means of which we might facilitate the attainment of such changes.

#### SUMMARY

In this report we called attention to a central psychic constellation which is observable by the age of 3 or 3½ and which appears to play an important role as a codeterminant of the form and early outcome of the struggles and conflicts of prelatency and latency. Our findings stem from a longitudinal study of the developmental process in which data emerging from regular observations and interviews have been correlated wherever possible with therapeutic insights.

We attempted to demonstrate that the central constellation arises out of the coordination during the first three years of life of certain key, preoedipal, developmental variables into a psychic organization possessing sufficient cohesion and stability to maintain a significant impact upon the course of further development. Clinical material was adduced to illustrate the constellation and its components. We described certain variables that are particularly significant in the formation of this constellation.

We considered some of the clinical and theoretical implications of our findings. Psychoanalytic investigators have been attempting to integrate the increasingly vast body of data about the preoedipal period with the assumptions concerning the central role of the oedipus complex in human psychic functioning. We hope that our work, which focuses upon the transition between the preoedipal and oedipal periods, will facilitate the successful completion of this complex and difficult task.

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